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CONCEIVING PARADOX: A COMPARATIVE ETHNOGRAPHIC STUDY OF FERTILITY IN ATHENS AND LONDON

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INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this paper is to analyse contemporary attitudes and approaches towards reproduction among a group of middle class Athenians and Londoners. This is part of a broader attempt to make sense of current fertility patterns in Europe. While birth rates have reached an unprecedented low in all European countries since at least the Second World War, the pathways through which they have been attained and the forces that sustain them at present in each are diverse. This situation has provided researchers from a variety of academic disciplines with a wealth of opportunities to examine the causes as well as the consequences of an increasingly ageing European population. Plenty of scope remains for anthropologists to show how their methods, theories and concepts are of value in this endeavour. In fact, given the sharp rise in intellectual concern in recent years in anthropology over matters pertaining to reproduction there is strong evidence to suggest that anthropological expertise is more relevant to the field of demography today than it has ever been in the past. New reproductive technologies in particular have paved the way for anthropologists to (re)consider how such categories as kinship, personhood and the body are related to childbearing. Understanding below-replacement fertility in Europe by means of a comparative ethnographic study based in Athens and London is in line with such developments.

In this paper, I present an overview of my research findings. Specifically, I show that notions of personhood permeated the narratives of family formation articulated by informants in each city, giving rise to two separate, though not wholly dissimilar, 'ways of seeing' reproduction. In constructing this argument it has, once more, become apparent that explanations dealing with European fertility need to be 'grounded' in specific contexts. Accordingly, theories that choose to speak of pan-European historical and cultural changes, homogeneous value orientations and overarching ideational systems are unable to make sense of the finer

distinctions in the fertility regimes of different member states. In order to substantiate this claim and relate it to the ideas that I will subsequently deal with in this paper, I will begin this account by briefly focusing on a set of theories that credit the decline in birth rates and below-replacement fertility across Europe to the diffusion of a particular type of personhood and, by implication, a specific kind of self. Although helpful, these theories do not capture the full complexity of Europe's current fertility situation. This is because the issues raised in them are looked at in the abstract with no attention to the manner in which different Europeans in diverse circumstances relate to them in practice.

THE STUDY

This research project was conducted over a period of almost two years. One half of the study was spent talking to middle class residents of the municipality of *Nea Smyrni* in Athens, Greece while the rest was devoted to recording the attitudes and experiences of a group of inhabitants living in a typically middle class borough in west London called Hammersmith and Fulham. Informants were approached through an array of locally-based organisations in each area of the two cities (playgroups, parent associations, family support groups and social clubs) and via the use of the snowball technique. The majority of study participants were women, though on occasion men (often the partners of female informants) also shared their views. The bulk of those with whom I made contact were of reproductive age, mostly in their late 20s, 30s and early 40s; thus, not all of them had yet completed their families. A smaller percentage of individuals approached in each field site did not have children. This was for a variety of reasons, though none to do with involuntary childlessness. Those unable to reproduce due to known infertility problems were not actively pursued in this research project. In brief, then, this was a study of middle class women who, at least according to European standards, were in the critical stages of their childbearing years; in other words, in the midst of making reproductive 'decisions' and

contemplating the future form of their families. This was not a comparative study in the strict sense of the term. Firstly, neither group was representative of the larger population of which they were a part, although both were exemplary of each. Secondly, there were no predetermined 'factors' of interest whose incidence I sought to establish in each setting and to subsequently compare. Whist aide-memoirs with themes expected to emerge in either and/or both fieldwork encounters were used, it was more the content of terms raised in conversation with each group's handful of informants, the logic of the arguments that they devised and the issues that emerged during discussions with them that were of principal interest. Through carrying out approximately 75 in-depth, open-ended interviews in each fieldwork site, in which participants were encouraged to construct an account of their reproductive lives in their own words and to express their thoughts on future childbearing, it was possible to determine the connections that people made between different parts of their experiences, views and judgements. While this was an intriguing finding in itself it was only through comparing the 'procreation stories' (Ginsburg 1987) of each group of informants, that is, by looking at *how* connections were constructed by each, the way 'facts' and opinions were brought together, that ideas specific to middle class Athenians and Londoners were exposed and, in this sense, compared.

INDIVIDUALISM AND THE 'SECOND DEMOGRAPHIC TRANSITION': A CRITICAL APPRAISAL

In an article published just over two decades ago Aries (1980) claimed that there were two successive motivations for the decline in birth rates in the Western world. The first was characterized by an intense concern for the well being of children and the family, and was responsible for shaping fertility across Western Europe between the end of the eighteenth century and the 1930s. The second, following World War II, was characterized by a preoccupation with the individual. It was not long after Aries' publication

that Lesthaeghe (1983) on his own and later with colleagues (Lesthaeghe and Meekers 1986; Lesthaeghe and Surkyn 1988) wrote a series of articles claiming that both motivations, while different in focus, were in fact an expression of the same broad transformation in the Western ideational system. Towards the end of the eighteenth century, 'philosophers of the Enlightenment', Lesthaeghe argued, 'redefined the position of the individual in relation to his universe and, in the process, legitimised the principle of individual freedom of choice' (1983, p.412-3). It was at the same time that in countries such as France and the United States the first major demographic transformation occurred, epitomised by the control of marital fertility. After World War II even greater preoccupation with the welfare or self-fulfilment of individuals took shape intensified further by the weakening of religious authority. 'Secular individualism' thus won over the constraining force of religion and more traditional forms of solidarity and individuals gained the right to define their own goals and the means of achieving them (Lesthaeghe 1983, p.429).

All these ideas are incorporated in what has come to be known as the theory of the 'second demographic transition'. In an article published in 1987 van de Kaa pronounced: 'Two key words characterize the norms and attitudes behind the first and second demographic transitions and highlight the contrasts between them: *altruistic* and *individualistic*' (p.5). While the first shift towards low fertility, witnessed in Europe roughly at the turn of the twentieth century was, van de Kaa argued, largely due to growing concern for the provision of an increasingly costly family and non-productive offspring, the second, set in the mid-1960s, was the result of growing emphasis upon self-fulfilment and personal liberties, in other words, individualism. A number of European countries thus experienced a shift from "the *golden age of marriage* to the *dawn of cohabitation*", "from the era of the *king-child with parents* to that of the *king-pair with child*", from "*preventive contraception* to *self-fulfilling conception*" and from "*uniform* to *pluralistic families and households*" (van de Kaa 1987, p.11). With increasing individualism, it was held, one by one the

countries of Europe would pass through this sequence of transformations. Although the timing and speed with which they would do so was likely to vary, they would all, eventually, experience this shift, prompted always by the force of individualism. Starting with northern and western European countries such as Finland, Norway, the United Kingdom and France, a second group of countries, including Greece, Malta and Portugal, would follow, as would, at a later date, certain Eastern European countries such as Hungary and Bulgaria. For each group fertility would, step by step, decline below the 2.1 child average necessary for a population to replicate itself.

The above trends were not, however, reflected on the ground. While fertility had declined across Europe with variable speed and disjointed timing it had not exactly followed the path described by van de Kaa. Although countries such as Greece and Portugal had reached below-replacement fertility, they had experienced an even further drop in birth rates than their western and northern European counterparts. For that reason, the theory's underlying premise- that there is a correlation between individualism and low fertility- appears problematic. In a more recent article, for example, Lesthaeghe (1998, p.6) associates the features of the 'second demographic transition' to 'long-term trends toward greater individual autonomy in ethical, religious and political domains', which he sees as being expressed in, among other trends, the growth of 'secularism', the spread of 'emancipation movements' and the general diminution of 'institutional regulation'. In countries such as Greece, however, this set of connections does not feature. Despite exceptionally low fertility nation-wide, Greeks' unwavering commitment to family and a relatively influential Church persist.

The idea that the Western world is composed of individuals is not of course a unique product of demographic thinking. In fact, as Irwin (2000) notes, sociologists and demographers converge on the view that the dissolution of traditional family types in Euro-American societies is a side

effect of the rise in individualism and, more particularly, of the growing pursuit of individual autonomy and individual choice. Anthropologists have also argued that Western societies privilege the individual and celebrate the idea of individualism more than do other non-Western groups (Carrithers et al. 1985; Strathern 1988). According to Fowler (2004), understanding people as individuals in the West can be traced back to the Renaissance. During this post-medieval period of European history persons came to be regarded as increasingly separate from the natural world, 'impermeable' or 'bounded' and 'indivisible'. Thought, reason and a sense of self became locked into the body and came to be seen as qualities which developed not from a person's participation in the world but from the exercise of 'individual will'- envisioned as a product of the mind. Gradually the body took a back seat, considered passive and subject to irrational and erratic emotions. In contrast, intellect became highly esteemed and a successful individual came to be judged as one who had 'strength of will' and 'clarity of reason'. Persons were therefore believed to be increasingly 'self-authored' with a 'persistent personal identity'. They were also thought to possess fixed, innate character traits that could not be altered through contact with the outside world and which could only really be passed on, if at all, from one generation to the next through procreation rather than in relations or in the course of exchange with others (living or dead). The soul or spirit lost ground and 'individuality' took over in an ever more secular society. 'Individual expression', 'autonomy', 'uniqueness', 'self-determination' and the 'freedom to act' emerged as key attributes of persons. 'Individualism' prevailed in celebration of these values. Numerous ethnographic studies, Fowler asserts, have revealed that in non-Western contexts beliefs surrounding what it means to be a person diverge considerably from this view. Whilst a conception of personal uniqueness is found cross-culturally and all people are individuals in the common sense of the term, in certain places the person is not imagined as a 'bounded, indivisible and self-determining social being who enters into relations with similarly bounded others' (Fowler 2004, p.11).

Despite general agreement over the idea that the 'indivisible individual' is a historically saturated conception of the person specific to Euro-American contexts, there have been a number of inquiries in recent years with regards to whether or not this is the only existing notion of personhood that there is in these societies. Carsten (2004) contends that the view of the Western person in which the individual reigns supreme is, in large measure, attributable to researchers' negligence of the notion of kinship. She argues that anthropologists working closer to 'home' have, on the whole, tended to focus on definitions of the person as determined in theology, philosophy and jurisprudence rather than in everyday life. In contrast, those researching what it means to be a person in non-Western milieus have, by and large, done the reverse with the effect of de-emphasising the individual. The implications of Carsten's argument in relation to the demographic explanations of low fertility discussed above are twofold. On the one hand, Carsten's analysis acts as a warning against those, demographers and anthropologists alike, who privilege the individual over society in their investigations of 'Westerners'. On the other hand, it leaves us with a question mark as regards the position of the individual and individualism in these contexts. Are such constructs to be discounted or can they still provide a window through which to interpret the thoughts and conduct of those living in the West? At least in relation to investigations focused on reproduction in Euro-American societies it appears that the individual as a construct and individualism as a philosophy of personhood can neither be completely ignored nor viewed on its own. Indeed it is possible to avoid having to choose one line of approach over the other. As Finch and Mason (2000) effectively demonstrate in their study of kinship and inheritance in England, *Passing On*, there is no need to dispose of the concept of individualism altogether, only to choose between the different uses that have been made of it. This is especially pertinent to the discussion under way because the version of individualism which Finch and Mason reject appears to be precisely that adopted by Lesthaeghe, his colleagues and van de Kaa in their explanations of European fertility.

In brief, this rendition of individualism can be described as of recent sociological origin, exemplified by the work of Bauman (1988), Giddens (1991; 1992) and Beck (1992). All three authors, according to Finch and Mason, argue that individualism is not only a product but also a prerequisite of modern living. Being 'ego-centred' is part and parcel of 'the reflexive project of the self' (Giddens 1991 cited in Finch and Mason 2000, p.21) in which self-identity, who we are and how we came to be where we are, is continuously worked at, reflected upon and pieced together by individuals in the format of a coherent narrative. Social conventions and rules no longer tell persons who they are, how or who to be. Whilst earlier societies would provide persons with more or less clearly defined roles, those living in late modernity have to formulate their own roles. According to this perspective, then, individualism has reached new heights with manifold and, largely, adverse effects on kinship relations and the family. Two problems are identified by Finch and Mason in these accounts. The first is that individualism is perceived to be a recent development rather than one which, many have shown, dates back to the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries or possibly even to as long ago as the thirteenth century (Macfarlane 1978). The second difficulty is that these sociological theories presume that the individual is the 'prime mover' in the course of self-creation. This leads on to the suggestion that relationships, though significant, are only a peripheral aspect of social existence rather than at the core of agency and identity. The 'second demographic transition' theory and associated explanations of European fertility change all place exclusive and excessive emphasis on the self-authored individual. The 'relational self' is not taken into consideration.

The concept of individualism, however, need not be discarded altogether. In fact, as will be discussed in more detail below, the above authors and others concur that a particular version of individualism- one that is not at odds with the existence of relational selves- is still prevalent in certain contexts; it is, for instance, central to how the English view kinship

(Strathern 1992). In addition to this, as Moore (1994) asserts, it is important to keep in mind that many discourses on the person exist simultaneously within a particular environment and, thus, it is always likely that one model of personhood will dominate over other less powerful ones at any one time. Underlying a great deal of Western thinking about reproduction, for example, is a model of individualism. In an insightful critique of Planned Parenthood, Ruhl (2002) sheds light on the 'procreative ideology'[1] dominant in advanced liberal states, to which she refers as the 'willed pregnancy'. Characteristic of the 'willed pregnancy' is the idea that human beings, irrespective of the circumstances in which they find themselves, have the capacity to reason. 'Liberalism', Ruhl claims, 'is posited on the notion of an ahistorical, disembodied, and hyperrational individual' (p.646). Those living in a modern liberal context are expected to make use of their rationality in order to overcome their animalistic urges and to become adept at self-control. Through careful planning and the use of foresight they then acquire the freedom to choose what is best for them and, ultimately, to control what is not. Individuals are expected to make the 'right' choice over matters pertaining to reproduction, without the need for state intervention, because they have the capacity to reason. The prize of following the logic of the 'willed pregnancy' is (female) autonomy from the burden of childbearing; in other words, the control of and supremacy over bodily functions. This logic is also reflected in the debate over the ethics of new reproductive technologies. In opposition to the widespread antipathy prompted by technological advances related to reproduction Robertson (1994), for instance, argues that respect for 'procreative freedom' is the key to resolving any prevailing conflicts of opinion since at the core of being a person with 'respect and dignity' lies the capacity to decide whether or not to have children.

[1] In her paper Ruhl acknowledges that the term "procreative ideology" is one originally constructed by Angus McLaren (1990) in *A History of Contraception: from Antiquity to the Present Day*. London: Blackwell.

Individual sovereignty or 'procreative choice', Robertson asserts, is 'a crucial self-defining experience' (p.4) and 'a moral right' (p.30).

Given all of the above perspectives, then, how is low fertility in Europe to be understood? Clearly individualism in the sense articulated by the demographers and sociologists cited above is not the primary motivating force in how Europeans think about and organise reproduction because just by privileging the individual over society the diversity of fertility patterns currently characterising Europe cannot be explained. A more 'relational' view of the person will have to be incorporated into analyses that seek to make sense of the course of negotiations over reproduction and family size. Nonetheless there is a need to clarify what individualism actually entails because it is a model of personhood that does, to a great extent, shape European thinking over a variety of issues, including reproduction. Appreciating that there are a number of different versions of what it means to be an individual- as there are of what it means to be a person- some of which are more dominant than others, is one way of overcoming the confusion that the concept evokes without losing sight of its unquestionable significance. In this process, however, it is also necessary to situate accounts of childbearing and family formation in the context of wider structures and ideologies. The Western construct of personhood, in its multiple guises, is one among a series of concepts that frame thoughts and practices relating to reproduction. Other key relevant perspectives are gender, sexuality and the body. What is more, none of these notions exist in a vacuum. Structures, such as the nature of a country's civil society (a feature which differs in Greece and the UK), also play a major part in moulding attitudes towards and experiences of procreation.

In the next two sections I will attempt to draw upon the arguments presented so far by reflecting upon the narrative accounts of two different groups of urban middle class Europeans. In each, I will focus on the

constraints as well as the rewards that informants' perceived to be associated with having children. Whilst appreciating that accounts may vary simply due a divergence in each group's surroundings (for example, the kinds of childcare facilities, work-life balance policies or family benefits available to each), I argue that, ultimately, the process of family formation is dependent upon a series of inter-weaving cultural values, beliefs and ideas. These are responsible for shaping each group's perceptions of what is 'good' or 'bad' about having children, when it is the 'right' time to have them and how many it is 'appropriate' to bear.

THE CASE OF ATHENS

Greek fertility has undergone considerable transformations over the course of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries and is now characterised by demographers as 'lowest-low' (Kohler et al. 2002), that is, it has a total period fertility rate under 1.3 children per woman. This is a surprising state of affairs, a 'paradox', as Paxson calls it (2004), for a country renowned, like most of its Mediterranean neighbours, for the strength of its family ties. While below-replacement fertility may not be of recent origin in Greece (Siampos and Kotsifakis 1990)[2] there is no doubt that Greeks' patterns of childbearing have changed in the last few decades. Unlike a number of other European countries, Greece did not experience a post-WWII baby boom and its total fertility rate did not decline after 1965, as it did elsewhere in Europe, remaining stable, instead, at 2.3 children per woman over the period 1956-1980 and eventually dropping to below-replacement after 1981 (Symeonidou

[2] Siampos and Kotsifakis (1990) calculate that women born as early as 1935 experienced below-replacement fertility (2.07 children per woman) and that the completed fertility of women born two decades later in 1955 was around 1.93 children per woman. Kotzamanis and Androulaki (personal communication) suggest that cohort fertility dropped steadily among the generation of women born in 1925 and more rapidly among those born after 1950. While the decline in cohort fertility among the first group of women (born between 1925 and 1950) was due to a reduction in births over the age of 35, among generations of women born after 1950 below-replacement fertility was a result of a decline in births in the younger years (between the ages of 20 and 30).

2002). By 2003 the provisional total period fertility value of Greece was 1.27 children per woman (Eurostat 2005).

According to Siampos (1993) the average age at which Greek women become mothers fell between 1933 and 1980 but since 1981 it has began to rise, at the same time as age-specific fertility rates have started to decline within all age groups. In 1999 the mean age of women at childbirth was almost 29 while the mean age of women at the birth of their first child in the same year was approximately 27 (Council of Europe 2003). In Greece extra-marital fertility is extremely low in comparison to other European countries. In 2003 it was estimated that only 4 per cent of Greek children were born outside wedlock whereas among the EU-15 countries the figure was an estimated 31 per cent (Eurostat 2005). This is related to the finding that, although in recent years non-marital cohabitation has increased, marriage remains the most popular type of union formation in Greece (Symeonidou 2002). Divorces, however, are more frequent nowadays than in the past and also appear to be taking place, ever more regularly, within the first 15 years of marriage, according to Kotzamanis (1997). Despite these developments, in comparison to other European countries, divorce rates in Greece are still among the lowest in Europe (Council of Europe 2003). Whereas, for instance, in 1998 in the United Kingdom there were 42.6 divorces per 100 marriages, in Greece there were only 12.7 (Sardon 2004).

Finally, according to Papadopoulos (1998), Greece has the highest percentage of couples with children (89.1 per cent) and married couples with two children (42.3 per cent) in Europe. It also, he claims, has the lowest percentage of lone parent families (10.9 per cent) and one of the lowest percentages of lone mothers with one child (5.4 per cent). However, the country appears to be closer to the European average in terms of larger families. Couples with three children make up 10.7 per cent of the total number of families with children, according to Papadopoulos, compared to

10.9 per cent in the UK. Moreover, Greece is among the countries with the lowest percentage of families consisting of couples with four or more children. Finally, according to the Greek Fertility and Family Survey (Symeonidou 2002), the proportion of childless women and men born after 1960 who do not want any children is quite low (1-1.4 per cent) while those who are content to have one child only may be rising in number.

These, then, are some of the key features that constitute the fertility regime of contemporary Greece. They are the reason behind what Greeks commonly refer to as 'underfertility' (*ipoyennitikótita*) or 'the demographic problem' (*to dimografikó*) - a matter of grave concern in the public imagination. What did Greeks think was driving this wave of low fertility? In Athens, it appeared that a small but recurring set of issues shaped the debate over reproduction. High on the agenda was *to oikonomikó*, in other words, money. The financial burden of having children in the capital was considered to be great while income-generating sources (that is, jobs) were thought to be in limited supply. This situation was exacerbated, it was argued, ever since Greece's entry into the European Monetary Union (2001) and its subsequent adoption of the euro in 2002. Many, however, claimed that *to oikonomikó* was a self-imposed setback to family-formation. Despite complaints about the rising cost of living informants also claimed to have developed an insatiable appetite for spending. 'Hyper-consumption' (*iperkatanalotismós*) was, they alleged, an inevitable consequence of Greece's 'modernisation' coupled with Greeks' penchant for *kéfi* (best captured by the French phrase 'joie de vivre'). Since the 1980s Athens' commercial landscape had transformed into that of other major European capitals with product and service prices to match. Athenian men and women prided themselves on their 'modern' appearance but, at the same time, professed to feeling immense pressure to conform to the latest fashion. Once they became parents, they alleged, this strain intensified as their children also began to cultivate their own sense of style and consumer demands. '*Hyper-consumption*' was double-edged, indicative of a general yet

ambivalently perceived change in lifestyle. In fact, its influence was reckoned to be so sweeping that it was often associated with the demise of the Greek family, another major cause of 'underfertility', according to informants.

Like 'hyper-consumption', a transformation in familial relationships was, in part, viewed in a positive light. The household, informants contended, was no longer modelled on the principle of 'man the master' (*aféndis*) posing as the head of the family while his wife, as 'mistress of the house' (*noikokyrá*), attended to his and their children's every needs. Women, both male and female informants claimed, like their European counterparts, were now 'liberated' (*hirafetíthikan*), owing to their growing participation in higher education and the labour force. This was not without cost however. In antithesis to the above perspective, women's changed social status was also judged to be a chief cause of Greece's fertility decline. Not just male but also female informants were in no doubt that women's novel aspirations and needs had contributed to an observed ascent in divorce rates, a postponement of marriage and, ultimately, a reduced desire to reproduce. Incorporated into this argument was the idea that gender relations had changed to such a degree that men's and women's sexualities had become 'confused'. While accounts varied, it was not uncommon for informants to suggest that a primary cause of 'underfertility' lay in a growing propensity for male homosexuality and a rise in female infringement of typically male roles which, inevitably, led to their adoption of characteristically masculine traits and their abandonment of feminine ones, chief among which was childbearing.

To make matters worse, the government's approach to childcare and the family was seen as doing little to improve the situation. *Koinonikí prónoia* or 'state welfare' was considered to be inadequate, giving Athenians' few incentives to have children. Grandparents, thus, had to be relied upon for support, especially in cases where both parents were working. Such help,

however, informants maintained, was not always available, especially since many of them had been born in provincial towns and villages, migrating to Athens in order to attend university or to obtain a job, hence distancing themselves from their parents. While maternity leave and other family policies were in force, middle class Athenians felt greatly disadvantaged relative to other Europeans against whom they often compared themselves. The frustration that they felt around this issue was exacerbated on account of what was perceived to be an insecure labour market which functioned primarily on the basis of personal connections (*méson*) rather than the principles of meritocracy. Pervading all these rationalizations was, however, the conviction that contemporary Athenians' reluctance to have children hinged on a unique Greek 'mentality' (*noötropía*). It was this, the least defined of all other explanations on 'underfertility' voiced, which this study sought to ascertain.

Looking into how the person (in this case the female person) was configured in the minds of informants was a good way of entering into this 'mentality' of which informants so frequently spoke. In the oft-cited edited volume on contemporary Greece, *Contested Identities*, Loizos and Papataxiarchis (1991), in acknowledgement of Collier and Yanagisako (1987), demonstrate that key to the constitution of 'modern' Greek personhood have been the 'mixed metaphors' of kinship and gender. Women, in particular, they argue, have realised their standing as persons mainly through being meticulous in their undertaking of tasks in the domestic domain and by successfully fulfilling the duties to which they were bound as mothers, wives and daughters. It has been primarily through their relationship to kin and in terms of domesticity, therefore, that Greek women have been defined as persons. Evidence in favour of this view can be found beyond *Contested Identities* in both rural and urban ethnographies of 'modern' Greece. In *Portrait of a Greek Mountain Village*, for example, du Boulay (1974) argues that Ambéliots derived a sense of themselves only through the enactment of roles

prescribed by society; self-worth, thus, emanated solely from successfully accomplishing tasks recognized in the social context and, of course, specific to each gender. Since the dominant roles of society were defined with reference to the family, it was through marriage and, subsequently, as a result of being good wives, mothers and house mistresses that women in *Ambéli* attained personhood. Hirschon (1989) describes a similar set of values among a group of Asia Minor refugees living in Athens in the 1970s. In order to be regarded as a proper female person, a woman in *Kokkinia* had to pass from the role of daughter or sister to that of wife and mother.

In these studies a comparison was often drawn between local notions of personhood and those originating in countries typically grouped together under the banner of 'Western' Europe. Both du Boulay and Hirschon pointed out that at the time of their fieldwork in Greece there was little scope for the development of the individual who was accountable only to and for him- or herself. In fact, individuality or acting with a view to gaining personal gratification rather than with the aim of fulfilling one's responsibilities to others was usually frowned upon. The distinction between 'modern' Greek and 'Western' European conceptualisations of personhood has also been noted by scholars outside the field of anthropology. Pollis (1965; 1987), for example, a political scientist, has written extensively and in great detail on the differences between the Greek and the 'Western' European view of self in order to account for a divergence in their comprehension of human rights. In Greece, she argues, the notion of individualism in the Anglo-Saxon sense is largely absent. In the Greek view, a person does not exist as an autonomous being but is defined by his or her relationships to specific people (usually belonging to his or her extended family) and particular groups (typically the community and the local Church). Whereas in the Anglo-Saxon and, mainly, Protestant perception of the self responsibility thus lies with the individual, according to the Greek perspective a person is accountable to society for his or her actions and decisions. This helps clarify, she contends, why in Greece

deviation from socially-imposed sanctions does not result in feelings of 'guilt' but in those of 'shame'. It also explains why such abstract concepts as justice, equality and uniform laws applied independently of personal relationships have been slow to appear in Greek legal terminology and why *filótimo*, roughly translated as the 'love of honour', instead of 'personal integrity', has been the key guiding force of behaviour among Greeks. Finally, it shed lights on the idea that for Greeks self-fulfilment stems from the successful implementation of one's role within the greater whole whereas in 'Western' Europe it is attained through the achievement of personally formulated goals. A highly centralised and regulative state combined with the late development of capitalism and industrialisation, widespread nationalism together with persistently strong bonds to local political and social groupings ensured, Pollis argues, that the idea of the individual as a being separate from society and against the state did not develop in Greece, like it did in the United Kingdom for instance.

In Greek ethnographies, even those written as long ago as the 1970s, there are, however, hints of the existence of an alternative sense of personhood to that which Pollis, du Boulay and Hirschon have described as typical of Greece; one regarded as more akin to that considered as characteristically 'Western' European or Anglo-Saxon. The last two authors cited, in fact, themselves make mention of this other ideology of the person. According to Loizos and Papataxiarchis (1991), gendered personhood in Greece has sometimes been observed to develop in contrast to or as separate from kinship. These alternative discourses of gender and personhood, they contend, most frequently appear outside marriage, that is, beyond the hold of the 'dominant conjugal model' which, they note, has been the primary guiding force of Greeks' everyday activities. In *Dance and the Body Politic in Northern Greece*, for example, Cowan (1990) describes a space in a Greek provincial town in which the basis of what people did depended not on ideas of socially prescribed personhood but on the rhetoric reminiscent of a

particular kind of individualism. The *kafetéria*[3], according to Cowan, was chiefly a female space where women saw men as their equals and claimed to make decisions not mindful of their reputation in the community but on the basis of their 'own needs, desires and interests' (p.86). This nonconforming definition of female personhood was accompanied, Cowan shows, by a unique perception of female sexuality. Whilst according to the dominant ideology of female personhood a woman's sexuality was defined in terms of her kinship role and was directed towards the perpetuation of the family via procreation, in the alternative model, expressed within the *kafetéria*, a woman was encountered as a 'human being', her capacity to bear children separate from her status as a person, her sexuality positively perceived and, like her body, believed to be under her full control.

Such conceptions of female personhood as described by Cowan were prevalent in Athens at the beginning of the twenty-first century. Primarily on account of greater financial independence, middle class Athenian women claimed they had obtained the means to 'self-determination' and the ability to gain mastery of their selves; that is, they felt they had acquired the power to control the extent to which they were defined in terms of their relationship to others (as mothers, wives and daughters). In line with this reasoning female sexuality was seen as being separate from procreation and procreation, in line with modern liberal ideology, was increasingly regarded as a process that had to be controlled and managed. Thus, many of the middle class women who participated in this study, especially those in their twenties and early thirties, expressed a sense of subjectivity in many ways different to that which they saw as typical of their mothers and grandmothers. 'Women,' I was told time after time, 'have their own personality (*prosopikótita*) now'. They also maintained that being a mother (*mitéra*), a woman (*yinéka*) and a human being

[3] The *kafetéria* is different from the *kafeneío* which is a male-dominated coffee shop now almost extinct in the cities though still common on the Greek islands and rural areas of mainland Greece.

or person (*ánthropos*) were distinct. In agreement with Dubisch (1993, p.282), I would argue that middle class Athenian women were becoming 'less concerned about their reputation in a bounded social group and more concerned with demonstrating 'modernity' in an urban setting and with establishing their own senses of personhood'.

Paradoxically, however, also clear from the accounts gathered in this investigation, becoming a mother in present-day Athens still constitutes the main means towards achieving a state of 'completion' as a person and as a woman, as Paxson (2004) also notes in her study of modern Greek motherhood. The issue is, thus, not whether or not women want to have children but when they will be able to have them (ibid.). 'The cult of motherhood', as Sant Cassia (1992) calls it, remains dominant in the urban Greek context and is strongly supported by the Church, which presents the Mother of God or the *Panayía* as the supreme symbol of motherhood. Among the female informants who participated in this study motherhood was seen as an act of *dimiourgía* (meaning 'creation' or 'creativity'). Through procreation middle class Athenian women said that they felt 'useful', participating not only in the construction of a 'healthy' society but also in the perpetuation of God's species. Although, they alleged, motherhood was a 'sacrifice' which involved having to 'divide one's self into multiple parts'- one part belonging to their child, one to their husband and another to themselves- it was a sacrifice that they believed was, ultimately, worth making. Being a good mother and a good *noikokyrá* ('mistress of the house') and, according to Paxson (2004), being *seen to be* both, were at the core of contemporary middle class Athenian women's identities. They were also key influences upon their reproductive agency. Thus, involuntary childlessness was pitied while voluntary childlessness was deemed selfish. In contrast, having one child was better than having none at all since 'completion' derived from becoming a mother not from the number of children born.

In sum, sustained interest among middle class Athenian women to conform to their roles as mothers and mistresses of their homes co-existed with their longing to be 'modern' women. By limiting their family size to one or two children female informants were, I argue, able to do both. Contrary to demographic explanations of individualism, this case study shows that while middle class Athenian women may believe in the ideal of the individual as an autonomous being who is beyond the hold of social convention and who acts only with self-regard, in practice they still identify with and wish to assume their socially-prescribed roles as mothers and house mistresses because by doing so they show to be good Greek women. Far from claiming that this is a traditional form of behaviour that will eventually disappear as a result of further 'modernisation', I argue, as Sant Cassia (1992) has done, that 'the cult of motherhood' is a product of urbanisation rather than the ruralisation of the city. Moreover, the intensification of the role of mothering in combination with the encroachment of a sense of personhood which esteems the genderless individual does not lead to tension. Though paradoxical, the co-presence of these two models of personhood is actually harmonious. Indeed, among middle class Athenian women, the adjustment of fertility to one or two children within structures that still mirror the ideals represented in the figure of the Mother of God, and the Holy Family more generally, form a coherent and logical approach to reproduction.

THE CASE OF LONDON

The United Kingdom presents its own unique fertility regime. From a peak in 1964 of 2.95 children per woman- following a 'baby boom'- the country's total period fertility rate declined sharply up until 1977 to 1.69 children per woman. After this fall there was a short-term recovery, followed by relative stability in the 1980s and a further drop in the 1990s (Office for National Statistics 2005). In 2000 the total period fertility rate in the UK was at an all-time low of 1.64 but by 2003 it had risen to an estimated 1.71 children per woman (Eurostat 2005). As in the case of Greece, however, below-

replacement fertility has characterised the United Kingdom for longer than the total period fertility rates suggest. The latest available figures released by the Office for National Statistics (2005) show that among women born in England and Wales in 1920, for instance, an average of 2.00 live births was achieved. The total cohort fertility rate then rose, hovering just above replacement until those women born in 1947. From that cohort onwards total fertility gradually dropped under 2.1 children per woman. Women born in 1955 had a total cohort fertility rate of 2.02 while those born in 1958 had on average 1.99 children. According to Sardon (2004) those born in 1960 were likely to have a total cohort fertility of 1.97 whereas those born in the mid-1960s could have as few as 1.89 children each.

In the United Kingdom as a whole the mean age of women at childbirth has increased progressively since 1971, reaching a peak of 29.2 years in 2001, driven by a rise in fertility rates among women aged 30 or over and a fall in rates among those under 30 (Council of Europe 2002). According to the Office for National Statistics (2005), the decline in family size in the UK among women born in the mid-1930s onwards is the result both of fewer women having large families and more women remaining childless. In England and Wales, for example, 20.9 per 100 women born in 1968 will have no children at all during their lifetime (as opposed to 19.7 per 100 women in the same cohort who will remain childless in Greece) (Sardon 2004). Conversely, the United Kingdom also has a high rate of teenage pregnancies. According to a report published by UNICEF (2001) the UK has the highest teenage birth rate in Europe. In 1998 the proportion of young women aged 15 to 19 who gave birth was 30.8 per 1000, while in Greece the equivalent figure in the same year was 11.8 per 1000. Expressed another way, whereas in the latter the percentage of 20 year-old women who had already given birth was 5 per cent, in the former it was 13 per cent. Unlike in the UK, however, a significant proportion of teenage births in Greece (80 per cent as opposed to 10 per cent) are to teenagers who are married.

Extra-marital fertility is also high in the UK in comparison to Greece. While in 1960 only around 5 per cent of live births in the UK occurred outside marriage, in 2003 an estimated 43 per cent of children were born extra-maritally (Eurostat 2005). This is in sharp contrast to what is happening in Greece where fewer than 5 per cent of births are outside wedlock. UK extra-marital childbearing has been paralleled by a rise in cohabitation. Unions of this nature are now widely formed by both men and women, those single and divorced, pre- and post-marriage and, to a lesser extent, as a lifelong alternative to marriage (Haskey 2001). According to the Council of Europe (2003), the proportion of unmarried women aged 18 to 49 who were cohabiting in Great Britain in 1985 was 16 per cent. By 1996 this proportion had risen to 26 per cent, so that one in every four unmarried women aged 18-49 was now cohabiting. In Greece, cohabitation may be on the rise but marriage remains strong.

These, then, are some of the characteristics that are feeding the popular debate on low fertility in the UK, which has a relatively different focus from that observed in Greece. Press coverage over the decline in birth rates in Britain is mainly considered in terms of its impact on population ageing and, subsequently, as a major determinant in what is expected to be a serious pension crisis in the near-future. Whilst a few articles in the national press point to a rise in the country's immigration levels in connection with a fall in the number of children born to white British residents, such cases are not as common as those which depict the consequences of fertility decline in economic terms. Low birth rates are, thus, not perceived to be a 'threat' to the nation, as they are in Greece and reproductive decision-making is seen solely as the concern of the individual woman or couple not of the state. With regards to the causes of low fertility, the popular debate revolves around a number of key issues, primary among which is the difficulty of maintaining a 'work-life balance'. The proliferation of female roles and the complexity involved in sustaining a successful career whilst also being a mother is

sometimes explicitly linked to low birth rates in newspaper articles but it is most frequently cited as a problem in itself. Indeed, during verbal exchanges with informants a considerable amount of time was spent talking about the dilemmas involved in managing a successful career at the same time as attempting to raise children. A number of other issues comprise the popular debate on low fertility in England, ranging from the postponement of parenthood to the costs of childcare and the content of family-related policies. However, there is no space left here to examine each of these in more detail. Instead, it is necessary to turn to an issue closer to the original aims of this paper.

The notion of individualism has been used by a number of scholars to characterise English society (Macfarlane 1978, 1992; Strathern 1992; Finch and Mason 2000). This individualism, however, is one which, as Strathern (1992) argues, *grows out of* rather than *in antithesis to* social relationships and kinship. The English, according to Strathern, do not comprise of a society of atomised individuals but of one where persons are perceived to be unique, relating to each other not by virtue of their position in society but because they 'choose to do so'. This becomes most evident in the field of kinship. According to Macfarlane (1978; cited in Finch and Mason 2000, p.19) in the English context, each individual expects to 'create a family not to join one'. Once born, a child, for example, does not simply slot into a predetermined genealogical position, for while he or she is somebody's son or daughter, he or she is also assumed to be a distinct individual with the flexibility to select with whom he or she interacts. Subsequently, the relationships that he or she forms are also not preordained. Thus, a characteristic of studies of English kinship is that there are no specific rules of conduct or obligation among kin (Firth et al. 1969; Finch 1989). This does not mean that there is no close contact between kin or that family members are not taken into account when making decisions or that there is an infrequent exchange of favours and assistance between individuals belonging to the same kin group. On the contrary, there is plenty

of evidence to suggest that kinship is important even in such large urban centres as London (Butler and Robson 2003). However, among the English, unlike in other societies, when a person is born into a specific genealogical framework s/he has the capacity to choose whom to recognise within that genealogy and with whom to form a meaningful relationship.

In connection to starting a family analogous principles seem to apply. Thus, among the group of persons interviewed for this study having children was expressed as a 'lifestyle choice' rather than as a 'social duty' (in contrast to Athenians). While a number of informants claimed they felt they would not be happy being 'childfree', none considered those who chose not to have children to be socially irresponsible. Equally, while it was deemed better for the development of the child to have both parents present, concern over single parenthood was only expressed in terms of the practical difficulties involved in raising a child alone not in terms of its immorality or impropriety. Thus, a variety of family formation strategies and family types, even a total evasion of parenthood, were deemed a matter of 'personal choice'. In line with this reasoning, and in sharp contrast to Athenian informants, motherhood was not believed to 'complete' a woman. While being a mother was thought to bestow many benefits, and to be a very important source of happiness and self-fulfilment, the suggestion that without this experience a woman would be incomplete as a person was generally refuted. High on the list of other rewarding activities was having a career and being in a good relationship. In fact, motherhood was often felt to interfere with these other facets of life. Moreover, upon becoming mothers the majority of informants claimed to have experienced a loss of control over their lives and to have undergone an identity crisis, especially if they had decided not to go back to work after their children were born. Whereas in Athens motherhood was believed to confer power and status to women, among those living in London the reverse was frequently suggested. This is paradoxical given the higher total fertility rates of the UK as opposed to Greece and the overall bigger

average family size of the English than Athenian middle class group of informants encountered in this study. In brief, this finding weakens the assumption that individualism- at least of the sort described as typical of English society- is tied to a reduced 'desire' to reproduce.

In order to understand this paradox, English individualism has to be interpreted in conjunction with other views and in light of other contexts. As mentioned in the opening paragraphs of this paper, for example, a major difference between Athens and London was in the nature of civil society[4] characteristic of each city. While middle class Athenians relied heavily on family for childcare assistance, many of the middle class Londoners I interviewed appeared to depend largely on voluntary networks operating in their local community. The National Childbirth Trust, for example, was a major source of support for middle class English mothers especially at the stages just prior to and following the birth of a child. This was indicative of a more wide-ranging difference in how middle class Athenians and Londoners perceived childcare. While the former were reluctant to employ nannies and to put very young children in day-care, the latter were more open to the opportunities afforded by both service providers, though not all chose to take advantage of them. In addition, despite motherhood often being described a trying experience, many of the English informants who participated in this study claimed that having a family was one of the most 'natural' and 'biologically-driven' of human needs. While some did not possess a 'maternal instinct' and therefore were justified in their wish not to procreate, those who

[4] According to the London School of Economics' Centre for Civil Society 'civil society refers to the arena of uncoerced collective action around shared interests, purposes and values. In theory, its institutional forms are distinct from those of the state, family and market, though in practice, the boundaries between state, civil society, family and market are often complex, blurred and negotiated. Civil society commonly embraces a diversity of spaces, actors and institutional forms, varying in their degree of formality, autonomy and power. Civil societies are often populated by organisations such as registered charities, development non-governmental organisations, community groups, women's organisations, faith-based organisations, professional associations, trade unions, self-help groups, social movements, business associations, coalitions and advocacy group.

did believed children were a 'gift', a value in and of themselves, the product of love between two individuals, an antidote to the world of work and money. Childbearing was not 'an act of creation' as it was said to be in Athens but rather an 'experience' that enriched their lives. Different moral perspectives also permeated informants' narratives over childrearing practices and the 'proper' upbringing of children but a discussion of these fall outside the confines of this discussion. The point is that notions of individualism, in England as elsewhere, have to be looked at in conjunction with, rather than in antithesis to, such ideas.

Conclusion

In this paper I have attempted to show that explanations of low fertility in Europe have been prone to generalisations and oversimplifications. The main purpose has been to demonstrate that the attitudes, experiences and values that correspond to contemporary European fertility patterns cannot be grouped together under a single premise. One conclusion that can be drawn from this analysis is that European fertility is full of paradoxes. In order to resolve these, a twofold approach is necessary: on the one had, it is important to read closely people's narratives of family formation and their attitudes towards having children in order to identify the logic(s) - often awash with contradictions - which underscore their thinking and their actions. On the other hand, it is also vital for researchers to break-down the terms that they themselves use to describe and categorise their object(s) of study. No matter how useful ideas such as that of individualism might be they have first to be unpacked and then to be reviewed within specific temporal and spatial contexts. Through this tactic not only might the paradoxes of low fertility be resolved but chances are that they will also be exposed as constructions of our own making.

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